The Arkadians Short Guide

The Arkadians by Lloyd Alexander

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Overview

For The Arkadians, Alexander draws on modern archeological and anthropological theories about the development of the Ancient Greek culture, as well as on Ancient Greek mythology.

Originally, so modern theory says, early Greece, long before the Golden Age or the time of Homer (who wrote The Illyiad and The Odyssey), was inhabited by a pastoral matriarchal culture whose chief deities were female and generally were associated with specific territories. For instance, the goddess that would become Athena would have been associated with the territory of Athens, perhaps even specifically with the hills which the Parthenon crowns. The culture that we now think of as the Ancient Greek one migrated into Greece from the north, bringing with it a patriarchal society whose chief gods were male. The mixture of the two cultures resulted in the new one becoming dominant, but nonetheless incorporating in their own mythology the chief deities of the original culture. Thus the early goddess who became Athena was turned into a deity subservient to the male Zeus.

Alexander places his tale in the middle of the period in which these contending cultures were interacting, with the older culture reluctantly giving way to the newer one. The older culture is dominated by women: goddesses, prophetesses, healers, and arbiters. The newer culture's gods are not as well-developed in the novel as are the gods of the older culture, who are represented by the powerful Bear.

The newer culture is controlled by men, some of whom are suspicious of women with power. They are even fearful of females such as the WomanWho-Talks-to-Snakes (the "pythoness") and the Lady of Wild Things. The complex cultural underpinnings of the novel give it considerable depth.

Throughout the novel, as a plot of high adventure unfolds, the two cultures first come into violent conflict and then eventually reach compromises. By the end of the novel, Alexander has presented a carefully considered account of how the two cultures may have learned to live with each other, with the newly dominant patriarchal culture learning the value of the matriarchal culture's knowledge of the seasons for agriculture, the healing arts, and other natural wisdom.

Thus The Arkadians focuses on the time when the Ancient Greek culture was beginning, when new myths were forming and a new religion taking shape. Alexander is gifted with a wonderful sense of humor and none of his details are dull. Any moment that could become a tedious lecture is instead transformed into a moment of witty insight into human nature, often through storytelling. Nearly every character has stories to tell—some imaginary, some true. Fronto the poet, in the form of a donkey, is always reshaping stories to suit his audience, pointing out how a little exaggeration, some romantic love, and some violent action can make a dull tale into an entertaining one. For instance, Oudeis's story of how he helped some thugs break into a walled city becomes the foundation for the epic of the Greek battle against Troy: a wooden jackass becomes

a huge horse, the Greek ruffians become heroic warriors, the Trojans leave the city walls for colossal battles (which Oudeis says they did not do), and all the action is unified with a central tale of doomed romantic love. Oudeis himself, who is very good at building things but has terrible luck when sailing, seems likely to be the model for the Odysseus of Homer's epic story. In the Odysseus story, a clever warrior who figured out how to trick the Trojans in the Iliad becomes lost at sea, wandering for many years before coming home to his wife. In The Arkadians, poor old Oudeis comes home to a fiancee who owns a tavern and is mighty unhappy with his having been away for too many years—not just because he was lost for seven years, but because he thought she was too angry with him to take him back. Thus The Arkadians becomes more than a study of an ancient time; it becomes an adventure in myth-making as Fronto and his protege Lucian take down-to-earth adventures and embellish them until each event seems superhuman and heroic.

Part of the art of storytelling, Fronto points out, is choosing details carefully and then presenting them in a way that will attract and entertain an audience. Lucian, for instance, discovers that his tale can be told in either a bland or a riveting style. He can explain how he fled with a donkey in the night because he feared he would be killed in the morning, or he can capture the interest of listeners with a suspenseful story of his being threatened with death by chopping from huge meat cleavers and how he struggled through heavily armed guards to make his escape.

About the Author

Lloyd Alexander is a towering figure in young adult literature with his fiction earning awards, critical praise, and a large audience. He did not come by his fame and popularity easily; he labored for many years and endured frequent rejections before achieving renown. The tremendous success of his second novel for young adults, The Book of Three (see separate entry, Vol. 5), made him almost overnight one of the foremost writers for The Arkadians 4425 young people. The book's lyrical prose, complex characters, and wellstructured plot justifiably garnered critical acclaim and great acceptance from the book-buying public.

He was born in Philadelphia on January 30, 1924 to Edna Chudley Alexander and Alan Audley Alexander, a stockbroker. As a youngster, he was an avid reader of mythology and folk tales. These early readings may have inspired The Arkadians and his other recent writings for young adults and younger children that focus on African and Asian cultures as well as that of Ancient Greece.

Alexander worked as a teenager to earn money for college but only attended a semester at West Chester State Teacher's College before joining the army in 1942, where he worked as an intelligence agent. While stationed for a time in Wales, he developed a passion for Celtic folklore and culture that inspired his Prydain Chronicles.

He was later stationed in Paris as a counterintelligence agent. After being discharged from the army, he attended Sorbonne University in Paris, where he not only received a college degree but met and married his wife, Janine Denni.

Alexander bounced from one job to another for years, working as a cartoonist, artist, advertising writer, and editor, while writing novels in his spare time. Unable to find a publisher for his first three novels, all for adults, Alexander struggled to support his family. He turned his frustration into humor and wrote a book And Let the Credit Go (1955), about the travails of writing for publication. In the early 1960s, he turned his attention to young audiences and wrote Time Cat, which was published in 1963 (republished in 1996). While writing this book he came across Welsh folklore, which rekindled his youthful interest in Celtic mythology and culture, thus inspiring The Book of Three (1964), the first of the Prydain Chronicles, a series of daring yet humorous adventures set in a land of magic.

Since then, Alexander's reputation has climbed not only among critics, but among a large audience that includes adult readers as well as young ones. C. S. Lewis once wrote that a way to tell whether a book for young readers is good is to read and enjoy it as a youngster and then read it again years later— if one still liked the book as a grownup, then it is probably good literature. Nearly all of Alexander's books meet this criterion, with graceful prose, interesting characters, sharp wit, and complex plots, all appealing to young and old readers. He has proven himself to be a master craftsman in several types of novels; swordand-sorcery fantasies like the Prydain Chronicles; adventures set in ancient cultures and mythological worlds like The Arkadians; and a

series of fine melodramatic mysteries featuring the courageous and versatile Vesper Holly. He has also written a more realistic group of novels about war and its effects—the Westmark Trilogy. Alexander's recent writing seems to chiefly focus on the mythologies, folklore, and cultures of the world. In addition to The Arkadians, The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen (1991) tells of adventure and magic in a land much like ancient China, and a book for younger readers, The Fortune Tellers (1992), focuses on Cameroon in west central Africa.

Setting

The Arkadians takes place in Greece when the Ancient Greek culture was just emerging. The word "Arkadia" refers to a part of Greece that was inhabited by shepherds; in Western literature, Arkadia has traditionally been the locale for stories of sheep and shepherds, ancient gods, and the forces of nature. Alexander probably uses the word to allude to the Arkadian (or Arcadian) tradition and to suggest the context of his setting—a culture that revolved around nature worship and a close relationship between human beings and the natural world.

Social Sensitivity

The rights of women is a common theme in Alexander's writings. In The Arkadians, the theme is central to the action, serving as motivation for many of the characters. For the Bear worshipers, women are supposed to be subservient to men. One of Bromios's reasons for persecuting followers of the Lady of Wild Things is his distaste for women telling men what to do. The female followers of the Lady of Wild Things react bitterly toward their persecution by men; they choose not to write down their knowledge but instead memorize it in order not to share it with outsiders—especially males. Much of the action of the novel focuses on Lucian learning through observation and experience to respect women; other men, including Bromios, also learn to value women and to respect their civil rights.

Literary Qualities

The Arkadians is constructed in the form of a quest, with the goal being to change Fronto back into a human.

Ancient Greek epics are long discursive tales, often in the form of a quest.

Homer's Odyssey, the most famous of all Greek epics, provides many of the myths that Alexander uses in The Arkadians. Odysseus wanders over most of the Mediterranean region in his effort to reach home, and Lucian and his companions wander north and south, east and west, through several adventures and rarely in a straight line in their quest to help Fronto become a human again. In Homer's Iliad as well as his Odyssey the epic quest is one of the spirit as well as one of physical prowess, and The Arkadians captures this element well with Lucian seeking to learn what he should do with his life; nearly all the other important characters learn something important about themselves. Even the dictatorial and austere Lady-of-WildThings learns that she has been too closed minded.

Alexander's style is beautiful and lyrical. Take for example the name Joy-in-the-Dance. It is at once concise, yet evocative of the character's personality; it is a happy, musical name that not only speaks for the character but is in and of itself beautiful. The Arkadians is filled with such conscientious attention to words and the responses they evoke.

Alexander risks losing his readers by frequently reminding them that they are reading a work of fiction—the absorption of the audience into a tale of adventure can be broken by reminders that the events are just inventions of the author. Yet, the art of storytelling is central to the ideas of the book.

Alexander not only offers an account of two cultures mixing, of how myths may be born, of adventure, and of romantic love, but also of how stories are created to please audiences. Indeed, all the other elements of the novel are dependent on the recurring theme of storytelling, and much of the novel's fun would be lost without it.

Take for instance Lucian's poor attempt to make himself seem more exciting to Joy-in-the-Dance by telling her that he was imprisoned in a jar by Calchas and Cerdo and of how he cleverly escaped from the jar, then: Seeing me about to escape, the villains pursued me all around the storeroom, brandishing their murderous cleavers and vowing to chop me into a hundred pieces.

Dodging Calchas, I was nearly overtaken by Phobos; spinning away from Phobos, I strove to elude Calchas. Step by step, inch by inch, they pressed me closer and closer. Another instant and I would be hopelessly trapped.

Calchas raised his cleaver, about to bring it down on my head.

The gleaming blade whistled through the air. In the nick of time, even as the fearsome weapon was no more than a hair's breadth away, I sprang through a window, raced across the courtyard, scaled the wall, and dropped to the other side.

4432 The Arkadians This is not only delightfully funny, it is a good lesson in literary excess. As the narrative of The Arkadians proves, running away with a talking donkey who is a poet is sufficiently interesting without gleaming blades whistling through the air. As Lucian develops, his storytelling skills also mature, and Alexander shows through the stories, sometimes with explanations from Fronto, how an interesting tale may be made out of seemingly uninteresting events. Every word works toward the image, and the language is not only clever but combines slapstick comedy with wordplay—typical of the humor and language of the book as a whole.

Themes and Characters

A hallmark of Alexander's fiction is excellence of characterization, and The Arkadians is a good example of Alexander's skill and sensitivity in creating a varied cast. Lucian seems like a real person, a young man who struggles to be honest in a society where honesty can be cause for persecution and even murder. When he flees the palace of King Bromios, he encounters other characters and his personality is developed and fleshed-out through interactions with them. Alexander maintains that plausibility is essential to successful fantasy, and in Lucian's development, plausibility is a keynote. When Fronto tells him to embellish his story of escaping the palace, he reasonably responds that doing so would be silly. But like many people, he cannot resist the opportunity to make his life sound more interesting, especially as a young man speaking to a young woman, and he dresses up his story for Joy-in-the-Dance. "Facing this wheat-haired, gray-eyed girl, he suddenly felt, among other sensations, that he was a very dull fellow, with his dull beans and dull inventories." Joyin-the-Dance tells him that his story is ridiculous, which it is with its huge meat cleavers, and he begins to learn something about making a story plausible.

As Fronto points out, romantic love can add pleasure to a story, and Alexander throws Lucian and Joy-in-theDance together, a young bean-counter and a wise-beyond-her-years seeress, in such a way that their love seems inevitable. There is something endearing about an honest young man risking himself to help a friend—Fronto— and he shows himself to be adaptable by trying to adjust to the independent ways of the followers of the Lady of Wild Things. In an artfully crafted romantic pairing both characters should be fully developed, and in The Arkadians, just as Lucian becomes more well-rounded with each succeeding chapter, so to does Joy-in-theDance become more completely realized through her relations with Lucian and with other characters she meets.

She learns that not all Bear men are domineering churls and that she is not necessarily wiser than even a dull fellow like Lucian. Even as Lucian matures into a man who knows his destiny, she matures into a woman who can be forgiving of fools such as Bromios and who can make some reasonable compromises, even as Lucian must make them, in order to fulfill her own, unexpected destiny. As the Woman-Who-Talks-to-Snakes, she was supposed to keep herself apart from men—to be austere and aloof. But even the Lady of Wild Things turns out to have loved a man. Through her adventures Joy-in-the-Dance learns that she must stand up for herself and choose her own way in life, rather than the one decreed for her. By the novel's end she is a fully credible female, and her strength of character seems likely to compel the men around her to truly recognize the equality of women and that she will make an excellent partner in a marriage of equals.

The issue of male/female equality is prominent and well-handled in The Arkadians. Alexander offers no simple bromides; instead, his characters must wrestle with the complex realities of their own prejudices and misconceptions. Not only must Lucian learn that women have as valid a place as men in shaping society, but Joy-in-the-Dance must learn to rid herself of her own superior attitude toward men. The crucial event in

her development occurs when the Lady of Wild Things separates her from Lucian and their companions; her destiny is supposed to be apart from men. When Joy-inthe-Dance flees to be with Lucian, she takes the crucial step towards selfhood of learning to choose for herself, to attempt to forge her own destiny.

From then on she is not the condescending, sometimes flippant girl she was, but a courageous woman whose strength of character makes her as valuable to her friends as Lucian is to his. Through her complexity and her relationship with Lucian, Alexander carefully creates an image of how equality may be achieved between the genders: each person must take responsibility, not just receive it, and take action, not just wait for others to tell them how to respond.

Most of the other characters in the novel grow similarly, becoming more mature and wiser because of their experiences with Lucian and Joy-inthe-Dance. The most obvious growth comes in Bromios, a reluctant king to begin with and a tyrant. He realizes that he is not intelligent, and he takes bad advice from the royal soothsayers Calchas and Phobos. "He was a heavyfisted, barrel-chested man with a big voice and a hard head; no coward, certainly, but any thought of snakes made his flesh creep." His prejudices against snakes and women make him easy for the soothsayers to manipulate. When, in all honesty, WomanWho-Talks-to-Snakes gives him an unpleasant prophesy, he eagerly follows the advice of the evil pair, destroying the sanctuary of the pythoness and then persecuting all the women who follow the Lady of Wild Things. To leave him as an evil man who fears strong women would be easy and even satisfying. His destruction would culminate the vengeance of the persecuted people whose lives he has harmed, but Alexander takes his story in another direction. If Lucian and Joy-in-the-Dance have their humanizing weaknesses, then Bromios may be allowed his humanizing strengths. One of these characteristics is a desire to be liked; he may not be bright, as he admits, but he knows that what he has done has made his people hate him. He also figures out that he has been duped by the ill offices and dangerous advice of Calchas and Phobos. They are clever talkers, and they almost manage to convince him that if he is ritually sacrificed he will return, after a stay in paradise, healthier than ever. His instinct for survival causes him to flee. In the company of Lucian, Joy-in-the-Dance, and their friends, a new side of Bromios emerges. He is capable of gratitude and sacrifice; and his courage is manifest when he allows himself to be taken to certain death in order to save those who had befriended him. Alexander allows this potentially one-dimensional villain redeeming traits. These turn even a minor figure into a proportioned character whose repentance and ability to admit his mistakes are realistically portrayed.

The leader of the side of good in the novel is Lady of Wild Things. But for a courageous leader of a good, persecuted people, she is arrogant and unforgiving—unusual traits for a figure people admire. She even is a hypocrite; when she was a young woman she married a tall, strong man with a loving heart. For Joy-in-the-Dance, she will allow no such thing. Her destiny is to remain celibate, even unloved. Only reluctantly, with some prodding by See-Far-Ahead—"Think of a young warrior and a certain sanctuary maiden. Against her mother's wishes, did she not ride by night to his camp, where they exchanged marriage vows?"—does she see her way to accept the possibility that a Bear man could be a good man. Even the regal leader of healers and seeresses can

grow—"And so, Lucian Aiee-Ouch, I ask your pardon," she says. Her asking for pardon, for forgiveness is an impressive development in her suspicious and authoritarian personality. In the end, she becomes a warm human being instead of a remote religious leader.

Throughout The Arkadians, Alexander explores the roots of Ancient Greek culture, using his fictional creations to prefigure Greek mythological characters. Oudeis is a good example of this technique. Oudeis is sometimes called "clever Oudeis," an epithet that echoes Homer's phrase "clever Odysseus," inspired by Odysseus's idea for the Trojan horse and his unfailing resourcefulness in adversity.

Oudeis is intended to be the real source for Odysseus; he is the man behind the myth. He is clever at building things; he built a donkey for the soldiers who were besieging a city.

The animal would be left as a contemptuous gift, showing how little the soldiers respected their enemies. The idea was that the people of the city would take the plausibly contemptuous gift to their city as a symbol of their success. The ruse worked and the soldiers slaughtered everyone in the city. The story is a nasty one and Oudeis is not proud of his role in it, but Fronto quickly recasts it. A horse is more romantic than a donkey, so make the wooden donkey into a giant wooden horse; instead of a tiresome siege, let the inhabitants of the city send out warriors to do battle; instead of thugs, makes the besiegers heroic figures; and add the final imperative of romantic love—let two young, star-crossed lovers be found together at the end, to perish tragically. Throughout the novel, Alexander offers characters like Oudeis who are less-than-heroic prototypes for figures in Greek mythology.

Another example is Asterion, the unresourceful prince from Naxos who has come to the Bull Court to free his people from the tribute in human lives paid annually to the king Bolynthos.

He and the Bull Court are to be the source of the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, a story that likely does have its origin in an antique real-life event.

Only in Alexander's account the young prince is fatalistic and almost without a clue as to what to do; he is saved by the resourcefulness of Lucian, who is becoming a leader of men in spite of himself, and the courage of Joy-in-the-Dance. These allusions to mythological figures add not only depth to the narrative, but also color and humor. The mundane reality behind the myths is amusing; Fronto's shameless reshaping of events is funny, as is Catch-a-Tick's insistence on seeing everything that happens in a heroic light. Alexander gets much mileage out of even his minor characters.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why do the followers of the Lady of Wild Things not wish to write down their knowledge, preferring to memorize it? Do their explanations for doing this make sense? Why would Lucian want to have a library, instead of relying on memory?

2. Why is King Bromios suspicious of the followers of the Lady of Wild Things?

3. Fronto urges Lucian to embellish the stories of his adventures to make them seem more exciting than they were. Do you know of any present-day examples of writers taking an ordinary story and by expanding on it, making it seem exciting? (Hint: Read any supermarket tabloids recently?)

4. Why do people like Catch-a-Tick prefer sensational stories to the truth?

5. Who are the good people in The Arkadians and how do you know?

6. Why would many adults like The Arkadians as much as young adults?

7. Alexander has said that fantasy can tell people about life and living.

What does The Arkadians tell us about life and living?

8. When do both Lucian and Joy-inthe-Dance realize that they are in love with each other? How do they know?

9. Why would Bromios hurt people simply because his soothsayers advised him to?

10. What do Calchas and Phobos hope to gain by counseling Bromios to do evil deeds?

11. Why do some characters have descriptive names like Joy-in-theDance and See-Far-Ahead and others do not?

12. Why does Joy-in-the-Dance have other names?

13. Why does the Lady of Wild Things accept Joy-in-the-Dance's relationship with Lucian? Is this acceptance well motivated?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What do historians, archeologists, and anthropologists think happened to create the Ancient Greek culture?

Do they think that there once was a matriarchal culture in what is now Greece? Where did the patriarchal culture come from? What happened when the different cultures mixed?

2. One of the humorous elements of The Arkadians is the telling of the somewhat dull events that would eventually form the basis for spectacular myths of epic adventure. Select a well-known Greek myth and make up a not particularly heroic story-behindthe-story.

3. How many Ancient Greek myths can you identify in The Arkadians?

Which myths are they? How has Alexander changed them?

4. How do myths originate? What are their sources? How do they evolve?

5. Fronto declares, "Conflict, struggle, suspense—that's what's needed to make a tale move along." Does The Arkadians have these elements. Where in the novel are they to be found? Do they work as well as Fronto says they do?

6. Part of the process of redefining relationships between the genders involves defying stereotypes for men and women, yet Fronto says stereotypes and cliches can be useful in stories. How would they be useful, according to Fronto? Where in The Arkadians are stereotypes used? Where and for what reasons are they defied?

7. The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen is another effort by Alexander to look at the myths and traditions of an ancient culture. Compare it to The Arkadians. Is his use of myth more effective in one book than the other? What techniques does Alexander use in each to capture the flavor of the ancient culture?

8. What comes next for the Arkadians? Do the cultures learn to live together separately but in peace? Do they merge? Do they have open conflict again? Will one culture dominate the other? Write a story in which some of the future of the Arkadians is shown.

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Related Titles

Alexander's focus presently seems to be on exploring cultures ancient and modern in different parts of the world. The Arkadians focuses on the roots of Ancient Greek culture, whereas The Remarkable Journey of Prince Jen (1991) focuses on ancient China. This novel shares with The Arkadians a quest structure, featuring many diversions from the goal of the quest, as well as several separate tales woven into the narrative structure. Alexander's book for younger readers The Fortune Tellers takes place in Cameroon and tells of how a carpenter consults a disreputable fortuneteller and how the carpenter then seems to prosper.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996